

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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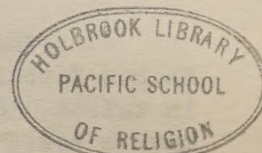
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## ETHICS OF LAND TENANCY\*\*

By Arthur Raper\*



The ethics of land tenancy deserves close study. For man's relation to land in the farm community frequently determines his standard of living, his role in community affairs, and his treatment of the land. These factors in turn influence the stability of the rural economy of which he is a part.

In terms of man's relation to land, there are two types of farmers--those who cultivate land they own, and those who cultivate land they do not own. These landless farmers are called farm tenants. The cotton plantation crescent, stretching from eastern Virginia to western Texas, includes the richest farm lands of the South. Here live the largest number of America's poorest and most dependent landless families. Wide expanses of cotton and corn fields are punctuated by tenant cabins with tiny bare yards.

### I. LIVING CONDITIONS AMONG COTTON TENANTS

That the vast majority of the farm tenant families of the South have a very low plane of living is shown by the houses they live in, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the dietary diseases they suffer from, the midwives and patent medicines they rely upon, the crude equipment they farm with, the low incomes they have, and the high rates of interest they pay.

#### Houses and Clothing

The typical tenant house has two or three rooms. It is built of a single thickness of rough boards, with no inside "finish." Careless observers have referred to the papers pasted over the walls as "decorations." Of course, they "decorate" a barren cabin, but they are put there to keep the wind out. Of hundreds of houses observed in representative counties, one-third had no window sash, one-half no window panes; two-thirds had leaky roofs; less than one in twenty had screens; and only one in a hundred had a fly-proof privy.

Plantation owners do not have tenant houses for whites and tenant houses for negroes--they have tenant houses. Not infrequently a negro family moves into a tenant cabin just vacated by a white tenant family, or vice versa. In the areas

\*Dr. Arthur Raper is Research and Field Secretary of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Atlanta, Georgia.

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(Note: Because of the author's investigations in the southern states, the present discussion will deal with that region. This paper is formed largely from verbatim materials appearing in his Preface to Peasantry, University of North Carolina Press, 1936, and his pamphlet, "The South's Landless Farmers," brought out by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Atlanta, Georgia.



characterized by the collapse of the plantation system, tenant families often occupy two or three rooms of a neglected and crumbling plantation homestead.

The patched overalls and faded gingham dresses of the tenant and wage hand families are as characteristic of the cotton country as are the twisted, unpainted cabins. The same families that produce the world's surplus cotton crop are often in need of such basic cotton products as napkins for the baby, mattresses for the beds, and a change of clothes for each member of the family.

### Diet and Health

The tenant's diet is just as inadequate as his house and his clothes. He has fatback meat, corn bread, sorghum molasses, and sweet potatoes and greens in season. Scarcely one-half the tenant families in the typical cotton county have a cow. Most of them have some sort of garden, but too often it amounts to little. Something like a fourth have not a single jar of home-canned fruits and vegetables, and only one-tenth have enough to be of any real value. Perhaps a sixth of the total have not eaten a single chicken or egg during the year! A can of pink salmon or sardines is a delicacy in many cotton cabins.

Such a diet results in a great deal of pellagra, rickets, low vitality, and unnecessary sickness. The death rate among the children is much higher in cropper than owner families. The likelihood of death in a farm home follows the land-tenure line and not the race line.

Some planters arrange for doctors to serve the tenant and wage hand families on their plantations, but this is not general. To the great majority of cotton cabins doctors are seldom called, trained nurses almost never. At childbirth most mothers are attended by midwives. Patent medicines command a considerable sum from the meagre cash incomes of the landless folk--more than doctors, nurses and prescribed medicines combined. Note this scene at a crossroads store: A farm tenant comes in and tells the storekeeper that the last medicine did not seem to help his wife any. The man behind the counter looks down the shelf, picks up a bottle, and says, "Well, John, you try this kind this time." The explanation is simple: The tenant could get patent medicine on his charge account at this store. The number of doctors, nurses and registered druggists is relatively small in most plantation counties, and even though they do a great deal of charity and near-charity work, the bulk of the poorest people still have to rely upon midwives and patent medicines--the former readily available and cheap--the latter readily available on credit at the crossroads store. The bald fact is that modern medical science does not reach most of the South's landless farmers.

### Farm Tools

The tools used by the typical tenant farmer are few and simple: one-horse gears, single-stock plows, long-handled hoes, double-blade axes, and a long sack to drag through the field at picking time. While most of urban America and much of rural America now utilize power-driven instruments and machines for rapid communication, fast travel and mass production, the tenant farmers of the South, with a few noticeable exceptions, still live and move within a one-horse civilization.

The farm tenant women have none of the modern household conveniences. They do the family wash over tubs, heat their flatirons before open fires, "tote" in the wood, carry water in lard cans or ten-quart buckets and bathe the children in washpans. These farm tenant women bear yet heavier burdens: They work along with their men in the field during the rush seasons in spring and fall, and they bear more children than any other group of women in America.



### Community Organization

The plantation community is essentially feudalistic. Any landless man who challenges the plantation controls is dealt with firmly. If he defies the system by organizing wage hands for higher wages, or farm tenants for written contracts, he is at once a target for withering ridicule, vitriolic denunciations; he may find himself without recourse to attorney and without civil rights; he may even be waylaid by hooded or unhooded leaders of the community, some of whom may be public officers.

If a group of tenants seriously try to accumulate savings with which to buy plantation lands, they may find themselves without farms for another year, for planters frequently unite to show "smart tenants" that they must stay in their places. Tenants who are too determined to escape tenancy do not fit well into a system which insists upon the continued centralized ownership and control of the land and upon the presence of propertyless and dependent tenants and wage hands.

Economically impoverished and culturally dependent, landless farmers have little opportunity to be represented in the South's representative government, to vote in the South's Democratic politics, or to protest in the South's Protestant religions. Held in their disinherited status by economic and cultural forces, it is not surprising that many of them are improvident, that they often fail to report for work when expected, that they are relatively unproductive, that they frequently make careless use of what little money and provisions they get.

### III. THE COTTON PLANTATION AND THE SOIL

Decade by decade, the South's farm tenancy rate has risen, until now over half of her farmers are without land. In the leading cotton states 60 to 70 per cent own no land, while in many of the region's banner cotton counties over nine-tenths of the farm families are landless. And where landless people are prevalent, soil fertility is treated as a marketable commodity rather than as a social asset.

#### Little Hope, Little Endeavor

Farm tenants are not expected to exercise initiative; they are expected to do what they are told to do. They are not supposed to be resourceful; they are supposed to be attentive, obedient and cheerful. They seldom apply themselves to their tasks with enthusiasm. Their inadequate diet, their submerged status in the community, their subservient relation to the landlord, and the meager returns for their labor leave them with low vitality and without an economic motive. Here lies the main reason for their listlessness, their improvidence, their hopelessness. Disinherited and defenseless, the farm tenant population has become resigned to its landlessness and chronic dependency.

#### "Why Worry, Anyway?"

With their number increasing and their status declining, the landless folk give up hope of land ownership. And in giving up hope of ownership, they lose any personal interest in the welfare of the farm. They no longer feel any sense of stewardship toward soil fertility. They get a crop as cheaply as they can, regardless of what happens to the land. Ill fares the land when the man who works it loses interest in it.

The farm tenants try to strike bargains from the land--just as the planters try to strike bargains from the tenants, just as the urban creditors try to strike bargains from the debtor planters. Finding themselves on the bottom of this debt structure, the tenants conclude from their experience that there is no escape, that they had just as well take what comes. So it is that "Why worry, anyway" has come to express the fatalistic philosophy of these defeated landless families.



South--frequently belong to the church, and sometimes take an active part. Then, too, there is emerging in widely scattered communities throughout the old South a number of highly emotional religious expressions which are gaining a considerable following among the white croppers and wage hands. The facts raise this composite question: What can the tenant-status rural negro church, the planter-status rural white church, or the emotional religious expressions (Holiness, etc.) do to improve the present conditions of the landless farmers in the South's plantation area?

#### Public Education

In the field of public education the children of tenant families are handicapped in several ways. Scant clothing keeps many of them from school even in mild weather, while on rainy or cold days children without warm clothes, good shoes and raincoats are almost compelled to stay about the home fire. Some of the poorer children have only a part of the books they need. Free textbooks in the public schools, as recently instituted in Georgia, render a real service. Even then, many parents cannot provide the pencils, paper and other personal supplies needed. While some rural white tenant children now ride in school busses to accredited schools, many white children and practically all rural negro children trudge along country roads, usually either dusty or muddy, to one-teacher school-houses, most of which are quite inadequate.

Hundreds of negro schoolrooms have no window sash or inside ceiling, no desks for children, no chair for teacher. In scores of plantation counties practically all rural negro schools convene in lodge halls and churches for want of publicly-owned schoolhouses. The salaries of the rural teachers are quite low. The average falls below \$25 per month in hundreds of counties in the old South. Many of these same counties do not have a high school for negroes.

But not even all white children with school busses at their door go to school. Sometimes they are kept in the cotton fields by their landlords, sometimes they are kept at home by their parents to do family chores.

#### Political Participation

Virtual wards of the community in religious and educational matters, the farm tenants and wage hands, with few exceptions, are inarticulate: they exercise no voice in community affairs; but few of them vote. Across the South, the proportion of people who exercise the franchise is smallest in the cotton counties where farm tenancy is highest. The backbone of the "Solid South" lies in these counties where almost no negroes and less than half--frequently less than one-fourth--of the whites vote.

Political participation and the administration of justice and public services, like all other phases of life in the plantation counties, reflect the dominance of the plantation owners and the defenseless role of the landless families. The sheriff and his deputies may meet the convenience of the landlord by the wholesale arrest of Saturday night's "crap shooters" and "vagrants" and their wholesale release on the promise that they will go into the cotton fields early Monday morning. Relief agencies may virtually quit giving relief during the cotton picking season.

By its very nature, the plantation has no middle class. The planters are in the upper class; the landless workers, whether tenants or wage hands, are in the lower class. There can be no real community life for the owner's children, and no adequate community life for the workers' children, in a neighborhood where one family owns everything and the rest of the people own nothing--except their cheap labor which brings them forty to seventy cents a day during the busy season and nothing during the extended slack-work periods.



### Family Income

The cotton tenant's low plane of living is enforced by his low income. The annual cash income of the typical tenant family in 1935 was less than \$225--about half the average for southern farm families, about one-fourth the national average for farm families. Out of this amount the tenant repaid "the furnish," that is, the advances of food and clothing which the landlord or merchant had made to him and his family while producing the crop.

Most of the food and clothing are advanced to the tenant in March, April and May; the debt is collected when the cotton is sold in September; "ten per cent interest" on money for three and a half months is an interest rate of 35 per cent per annum. The credit price, usually charged on the goods consumed in the spring, raises the total annual interest rate to 50 per cent or more. And so the tenant family's \$225 is actually worth much less than that amount in cash.

## II. TENANT FARMERS AND THE COMMUNITY

Generally speaking, farm tenants and wage hands do not participate in community affairs. They are the inarticulate recipients of such public policy and private practice as may obtain among those who control the economic life of the community.

### Church Membership

Recently a group of young rural ministers was asked: "What are you doing for the people who wear overalls? Are they getting any benefit from your church?" One said he had organized an "overall service." Another replied, "You know, a most interesting thing happened the other day. As I was going down the road with my leading rural layman, I suggested that we have a series of revival services. 'No,' he said, 'we don't need any; all the people here are in the church.' 'But,' I said, 'how about those white men in overalls back up there at the last house?' He closed the conversation with 'Those are just croppers.'"

In rural churches one sees only a few people in overalls. Yet many of the South's landless farmers have only patched overalls and denim jackets. The typical farm tenant is not able to wear Sunday clothes, to put money in the collection plate, nor to have the preacher come to his house for a family meal--it is doubtful whether the majority of the tenant families in the South would have enough knives, forks and plates to set a simple table for the family and a guest.

In most plantation counties a larger proportion of negro than of white tenants are church members. The rural negro church, though usually relying upon the scattered negro landowners for leadership, is within reach of the tenants and wage hands. The preacher is paid but little, his formal education is limited, his vocabulary is that of the fields, the songs are those of the common people, the church building is crude and the furnishings plain. In plantation areas the rural white church, though small, is painted; the pews are usually varnished, the aisles are carpeted, the man in the pulpit uses seminary language, the people read Psalms from a book and sing to the accompaniment of a reed organ or a piano, the preacher--who usually lives in a nearby town and receives a small salary--always appears for the monthly preaching service in a clean white shirt, pressed trousers, and shined shoes. Moreover, the rural white church membership is shifting to the town churches. In short, the rural negro church reflects the status of the farm tenant, while the rural white church reflects the status of the landowner. Herein lies the explanation of the larger church affiliation among negro tenants than white tenants.

But not all white tenants are unchurched. The most independent and the most successful tenants--particularly the cash renters in the newer part of the



### Debt Security

Such workers prove expensive and unproductive to the plantation system. They are ready victims of the plantation's debt structure, and they insist upon contracting debts of their own.

Some have looked at the tenants' self-arranged debts and termed them the unnecessary obligations of improvident fellows, with no sense of responsibility for themselves or their families either for today or tomorrow. But on closer study one sees landless and defenseless men without bank accounts, without commercial credit, without votes and without friends in court getting themselves in debt to men who have bank accounts, commercial credit, influence with peace officers and court officials. Thus, by these very debts, they secure for themselves protection not unlike that which hovered about the slaves. It is "good business" for creditors to protect their debtors. But the security which comes through debts is mockery, and the people who are forced to rely upon debt for security are subjects for redemption rather than condemnation.

### Racial Factors

The plantation system has not protected the land or the people who work it. Nor has it protected the white race or the plantation owners. The traditional plantation system, with its background in slavery, supervised the ex-slave in ways to keep him dependent and servile. But the plight of the landless negro in the old plantation areas of the South has not improved the condition of the average white farmer in these areas, for the percentage of white farmers in the landless group is almost as high here as elsewhere, and the proportion of these occupying the lowest tenant status--that of "croppers"--is higher than it is in other sections. By 1935, of 1,831,000 tenant families in the South nearly two-thirds were white. Thus the land tenure system, worked out to train, supervise and keep the negro "in his place," is now penalizing nearly twice as many white families as negro families.

### Bankrupt Planters

Since there is no way of getting something out of a man who owns nothing, whether white or negro, the plantation owners suffer all financial losses. It costs money to grow a crop--fertilizer for planting, feed for mules, food for dependent tenants, and so on. If the tenants can pay their rent and settle their accounts in the fall, the plantation owners can repay their debts. But when the cotton crop is short or the price is low the tenants cannot pay their rent and settle their accounts, and the plantation owners cannot satisfy their creditors. The bald fact is: the larger the plantation, the more likely it is to be subjected to bankruptcy. Beyond all this, the small land-owners who grow cotton in competition with the plantations are forced to follow exploitative farm practices.

### Tractors and Migrants

With the poorest people concentrated on the richest land, the current increase of farm tractors results in the eviction of many thousands of workers. Nor does the status of those who still remain on the land improve. In short, the increase of mechanization on cotton farms is thinning out the number of workers at the same time that it is driving them down the agricultural ladder from sharecroppers and tenants to wage hands and casual laborers. With a surplus of workers in county-seat towns and southern cities, migrant labor increases in the same communities where tractors are most widely used.

The plantation system stands four times condemned before the southern people in their efforts to achieve an abundant life: it impoverishes the farm tenants and wage hands, and then pushes them off the land as mechanization increases; it depletes the soil; it disinherits the plantation owners; and it robs the small owners of independence.

### Needed: A Genuinely Moral Relation of Man to Land

In concluding this discussion of the ethics of land tenancy, it should be emphasized that the South's poorest and most dependent people--the croppers and wage hands--are concentrated on the big plantations, and that the big plantations are located on the richest land. With much of the best land of the old South already depleted by exploitative plantation farming, and with the region's poorest and most dependent people concentrated on the richest land of the new South, the need for a genuinely moral relation of man to land is evident. The Abundant Life for the rural South awaits a constructive policy, a policy that will conserve and restore her soil, that will develop and enrich her people.

Some hopeful beginnings have already been made. The experiences in the rural South of enlightened local agencies and of the national Farm Security Administration and Rehabilitation Program clearly demonstrate that the landless cotton folk are responsive to intelligent oversight and sympathetic assistance. The fine response to these limited programs argues for their rapid expansion. Something constructive is being done. More could be done. Here is a challenge which should enlist the active sympathy and dynamic cooperation of religious statesmen everywhere.